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SUBJECT: UB SUSPENDS CLASSES AFTER STUDENT STRIKES

11. SUMMARY: Students at the University of Botswana (UB) are unhappy over changes in government policy regarding their monthly allowances. The UB Student Representative Council (SRC) organized a series of demonstrations to protest the changes, and an attempted march from the university to Parliament on February 2 was stopped by riot police. The UB Vice Chancellor announced February 4 that the university would "suspend lessons indefinitely" due to the unrest. One American university has suspended its exchange program with UB and flown its students home. At least 23 other American undergraduates are still enrolled at UB, although many of them have moved to off-campus housing. END SUMMARY.

Students Angry about Allowances

12. In Botswana, university students receive a monthly allowance from the government that is supposed to cover their cost of living (food, clothing, transport, toiletries). Students who live in campus dormitories receive 150 pula per month (approximately \$19), but are given free room and board, while students living off campus are supposed to receive 1,920 pula per month (approximately \$246) to enable them to pay for food and lodging. Botswana's Ministry of Education announced in late 2008 that the rules governing disbursement of monthly stipends for university students would change beginning in January 2009. The government will no longer pay an allowance to any student who has exceeded the normal time for his degree due to failing courses. One way that this change is being enforced is that payments were suspended to any student who began his program in 2004 or earlier (meaning they are now in year 5 or more at the university.) Students are also unhappy that the Ministry is reportedly making it harder for students to live off-campus and thus receive the higher monthly allowance. They claim that many students who have notified the university that they live off campus are still being paid the lower on-campus allowance rate and they cannot make ends meet.

Students Protest the Alleged Injustice

13. In January 2009, the SRC filed an urgent application with the High Court in Lobatse alleging that the Ministry of Education had "breached its contractual terms" with university students by changing allowance regulations. The High Court rejected the students' application on January 29, saying that it was not urgent and should be handled using normal court procedure. On January 30, the SRC declared that students were "on strike," and angry groups of students reportedly entered classrooms, the cafeteria, and other campus buildings trying to force non-participating colleagues (including American students at UB on various exchange programs) to join them. The protestors planned to march from the university to the Ministry of Education to present a petition, but their application for permission was denied by the police due to lack of sufficient advanced notice. The students decided to march without a permit, but were turned around by armed riot police.

14. Students continued to disrupt normal campus activities the week of February 2. SRC members allegedly patrolled campus to prevent

students from attempting to attend class while others entered dormitory rooms to try to force students to join them in protest. UB students tried to march again on February 2. They had hoped to convene in front of the Parliament, where Finance Minister Gaolathe was presenting Botswana's 2009-2010 budget, an important annual event with President Khama and other VIPs in attendance. However, they were again stopped by riot police. This time, however, the police-student confrontation grew violent, with students throwing stones and police using their batons. SRC leaders told the media that they believed the police used excessive force, which reportedly resulted in student injuries including broken bones. According to media accounts, a number of innocent bystanders were also caught up in the clash, which occurred near Gaborone's Main Mall. Class boycotts continued February 3-4, and on February 4 the Vice Chancellor announced that the UB had suspended lessons "indefinitely." The University Council was expected to meet on February 5 to determine the length of the closure. UB sources also told us that two members of the SRC have been expelled and the other members have been suspended.

American Students Move Out, Lay Low

15. The University of North Carolina-Greensboro chose to withdraw its four students from the UB after the protests began on January 30. All four students have departed Botswana. Several other exchange programs continue to operate, including the Consortium for International Educational Exchange (CIEE) and Associated Midwestern Colleges (ACM), which together have 23 American students at UB. Most foreign students have reportedly been moved away from the main UB campus, either a conference facility located in Mogoditshane (approximately 20 minutes from Gaborone) or to local hotels. Some

GABORONE 00000096 002 OF 002

foreign students have chosen to stay in their dorms at the main campus. The Consul has been in regular contact with the University's Office of International Exchanges and Partnerships and the leaders of the US-sponsored exchange programs. The Embassy also issued a Warden message on February 2 warning citizens about the unrest and asking that they avoid the area around the university campus. In addition, PAO met with university officials on February 4 and decided to postpone a Black History Month film festival at the university, which had been scheduled for February 9-13, until the security situation improves.

Comment

16. COMMENT: The GOB probably made a tactical error by announcing changes to its student stipend policy in the middle of an academic year and just before the festive season. Students had little time to understand the new rules before they took effect, and this may be why they have reacted so strongly to changes they perceive as unfair. However, in the current climate of belt-tightening and deficit budgets, it is hard to imagine that the GOB will give in to student demands and either pay to allow failing students to repeat semesters or allow more students to live off campus despite the availability of cheaper on-campus accommodation. Many workers in Botswana, especially domestics, laborers, and other non-professionals, make less than 1,900 pula per month, and there seems to be little public sympathy for the students' demands. It is therefore hard to see what the students will gain from this protest. Many commentators believe that if the university removes some of the rowdier SRC ringleaders, campus will settle down and classes will resume soon. Post will continue to maintain close contact with both university officials and the leaders of U.S. student exchange programs to ensure the safety of Americans at university of Botswana, and we will send additional warden messages as required. END COMMENT.

NOLAN